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ABSTRACT

The role that time frame plays in the media agenda-setting process was studied by examining the single issue of civil rights over an extended period between 1954 and 1976. The public agenda was determined from 27 Gallup polls, conducted between 1954 and 1976, which asked respondents what they considered the most important issue facing the American people. The media agenda consisted of the number of front page stories on civil rights that appeared in the New York Times during the six months prior to each Gallup poll. Zero-order correlations between the public and media agendas indicated a slight monotonic descent moving back in time to four months prior to the interviews, followed by a dramatic drop in the fifth and sixth months prior to the polls. The cumulative effect of the first two months prior to the polls was about as high or higher than all other combinations of cumulative correlations. Partialling out prior months indicated a "recency" effect during the first month. It was found that going back beyond two months prior to the public polls did not significantly improve the media agenda's prediction of the public agenda. Thus, the study provided further evidence of a strong agenda-setting effect; and it also indicated, at least for the civil rights issue, that the optimal effect span is the four to six weeks immediately prior to fieldwork. (RL)

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An Agenda-Setting Time-Frame

For the Civil Rights Issue

1954-1976

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In the seven years since McCombs and Shaw (1972) published the results of their seminal research on Mass Media Agenda-Setting, journals and conferences have witnessed a proliferation of studies in this area.[1] Perhaps researchers have been attracted by the inherent simplicity of the basic agenda-setting hypothesis, frequently summarized as the notion that "while media may not tell us what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about" (Cohen, 1963).

Communications researchers have employed a plethora of conceptual and operational definitions in their attempts to "replicate" McCombs and Shaw's 1972 findings (McCombs, Eyal, DeGeorge & Winter, 1979). The majority of those replications have compared the importance assigned to issues and personalities in the media (media agenda) with subsequent public salience of those issues and personalities (public agenda). Agenda-setting research has involved the construction of media and public measures. Extensive content analysis has been used to determine the former, while survey techniques have assessed the latter.

Since most of these studies measure and compare the media and public agendas over time, the temporal variable would appear to be crucial. However, as we will see from a review of the literature, this has not been the case. The question of the appropriate "time frame" for analysis has received

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[1] For pertinent bibliographies, see Shaw and McCombs (1977) and Myers (1978).

little systematic attention; in fact it has only very recently been elaborated (Eyal, Winter & DeGeorge, 1979; Eyal, 1979).

Methodologically, the "time frame" has been defined as the period between the beginning of the collection of the media content data, and the end of the collection of the public opinion data, or the total period under consideration from the beginning to the completion of the data-gathering process (Eyal et al., 1979; Eyal, 1979). Within this time frame there are four pertinent variables (Eyal, 1979):

- The media agenda duration or measuring term.
- The public agenda duration or measuring term.
- The time lag or span between the independent variable (media agenda) and the dependent variable (public agenda).
- The optimal effect span or peak association between media emphasis and public emphasis of an issue.

The critical variables, which have for the most part have been ignored in the research to date, are indicated in Figure 1a, on the following page, with a hypothetical example given in Figure 1b. The optimal effect span in Figure 1b would be determined by, for example, correlating two-week periods from the media agenda duration with the aggregate public agenda duration.

To provide some idea of the differing conceptual and operational definitions, Berelson (1942) mentions only that the media agenda was measured "for three time periods." McCombs and Shaw (1972) measured the public agenda over two and a half weeks and the media agenda over three and a half weeks. Gormley (1975) measured the public agenda over approximately one month, and media agenda during four and a half months, leaving a time lag of some five months between.

Figure 1A

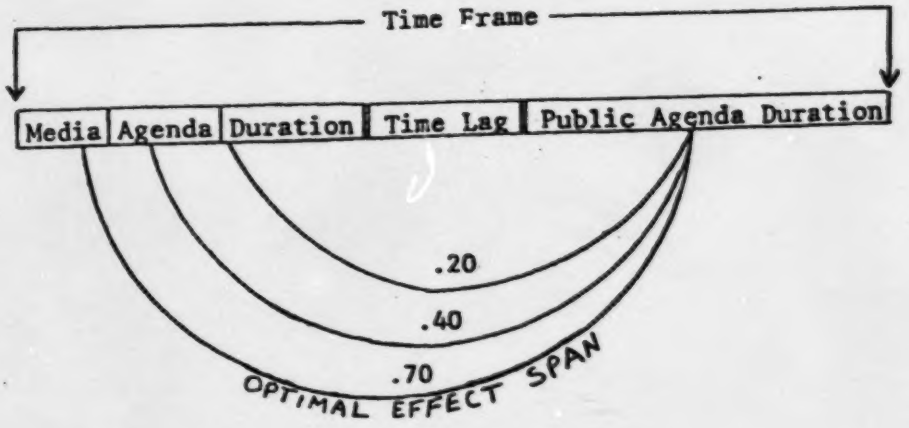
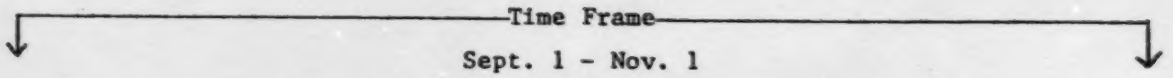


Figure 1B



Media Agenda Duration	Time Lag	Public Agenda Duration
Sept. 1 - Oct. 15	Oct. 16 - 23	Oct. 24 - Nov. 1
(Media Content Analysis)	(No data collected)	(Public Opinion Polling

Cohen (1975) measured public opinion over two weeks, and analyzed the media over three years, apparently with no time lag. Media agenda duration has thus ranged from one week (Mullins, 1977), to seven months (Stone, 1975), to three years (Cohen, 1975). Public agenda duration has ranged from one day (Hilker, 1976) to two months (Sohn, 1978).

In sum, few studies have broached the important question of the appropriate time frame for analysis; there has been little systematic theoretical or empirical examination of these variables. Most studies have instead chosen a single, short cross-sectional period, and as a result it has not been possible to determine if the strength or weakness of the association between media and public agendas is simply due to appropriate or inappropriate time frame components. As well, simply cumulating media content over long periods and comparing it in the aggregate to the public agenda has not led to a precise understanding of the agenda-setting process. Eyal (1979) systematically varied the media agenda duration and the time lag measures, producing twelve distinct time frame configurations. He tested the agenda-setting hypothesis in each of these temporal contexts and found different levels of agenda-setting influence in each. He concluded that the researcher's choice of media agenda duration and time lag must be anchored in theory, or at least in logic, rather than conjecture and random selection; and that these are crucial variables which we cannot continue to treat in haphazard fashion.

Other important variables that have been given little consideration are the number and nature of the individual issues examined. Perhaps the variable nature of individual issues precludes treating them in the aggregate, a problem that may explain inconsistent findings. Logically, issues vary in the amount of time necessary to bring them to a position of importance in public

opinion. A gas shortage may suddenly thrust the issues of energy conservation and alternative energy sources onto public agendas, or a series of oil spills may make pollution rise to importance, whereas it may take years for the honesty-in-government issue to become prominent in public awareness. Because each issue may have its own distinct optimal effect span, examining more than one issue at a time can be problematic. What happens if, for example, you measure six diverse issues in media and public agendas, utilizing a cross-sectional time frame of two months? As issues rise and fall in media and public agendas over time, some of those issues may have had an extended duration--may have peaked in the public agenda prior to the data collection, despite continued media emphasis. On the other hand, some may have just gained prominence in the mass media, in the media agenda measuring term chosen, and will not peak in duration or in the public agenda for some time.

Thus, the nature of individual issues and their histories of exposure in the media are important variables, which have only recently been considered. Zucker (1978) for example found agenda-setting effects for "unobtrusive" issues with which, he argued, we have less first-hand experience, such as pollution, drug abuse and energy, but not for more "obtrusive" issues such as the cost of living, unemployment and crime. The argument is that personal experience filters and to some extent overrides media emphasis.

Zucker also found that agenda-setting effects depend on the duration of exposure in the television medium--the initial impact of an issue such as pollution was present only in the first half of an eight-year period following its arrival on the television agenda.

Similarly, Stroman (1978) found an agenda-setting effect only for what she called "short-term" issues, such as campus unrest and race relations, com-

pared to "long-term" issues such as health, taxes, and unemployment, in her correlations between Gallup data and magazine content as indexed by the Readers' Guide to the Periodical Literature. Again, this indicates the importance of investigating issues' duration of exposure in the media.

Eyal (1979) initially found no agenda-setting relationship between media content and public opinion on 11 aggregated issues during the 1976 presidential election. Further analysis revealed however that negative correlations for the obtrusive issues, as well as differing time frames, were cancelling out positive correlations for the unobtrusive issues. This led to no overall agenda-setting effect.

Despite this evidence suggesting that the appropriate time frame, and agenda-setting effects, will vary with the nature of the issue, many researchers have continued to design studies in the following manner: The medium or media are analyzed to determine the salience of perhaps seven diverse issues over a single time period; these findings are then compared to an assessment of the public agenda. Because of the nature of the data that are gathered, nothing short of almost wholesale transferal of the salience of these diverse issues, from media to public, demonstrates agenda-setting effects. With seven issues (or cases), a rank-order correlation of $r = +.714$ is required for statistical significance at conventional levels ($p = .05$, 1-tail). If issues vary in the time required to place them on the public agenda, and if most studies use several issues and a single media agenda duration, it is not realistic to expect an overall rank-order correlation of +.714.

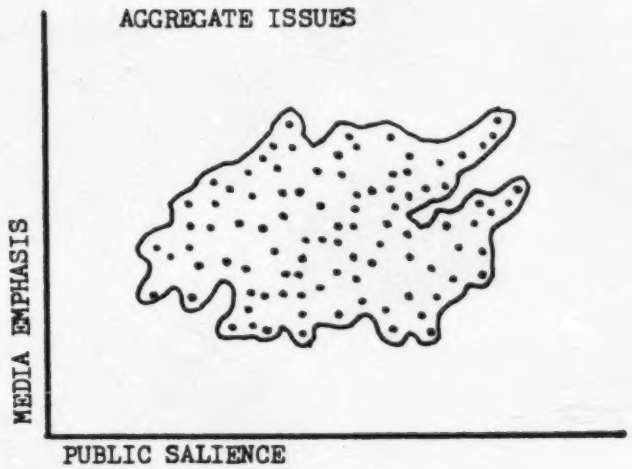
The problems associated with aggregating issues are not solely conceptual in nature. There is another very real methodological problem in failing to treat issues individually. Just as opposite effects may cancel each other out

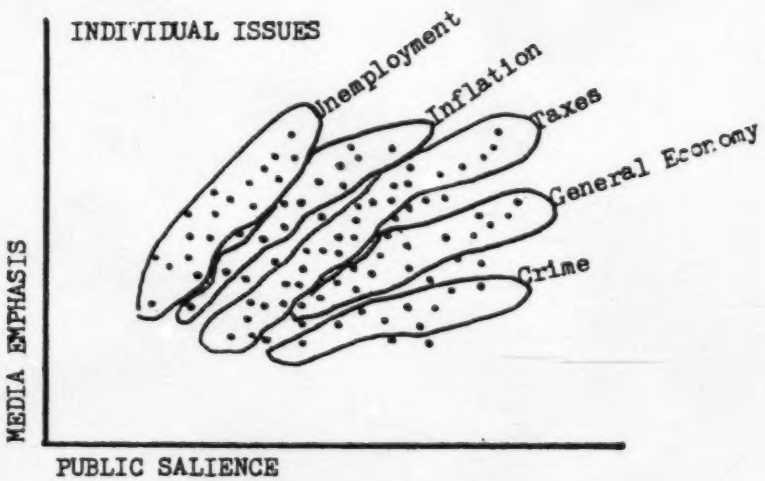
(Eyal, 1979), so too may aggregate correlation of issues obscure individual relationships. As indicated in Figure 2, the correlations between media and public agendas are disguised when issues are treated en masse, rather than compared individually. It no more makes sense to correlate aggregate issues than it does to compare media and public agendas without distinguishing between low and high media use groups.

Figure 2 about here

Choosing a limited cross-sectional period combined with diverse issues also may have serious effects on results. The varying nature of individual issues would seem to preclude the possibility of wholesale transfer of issues from media to public agenda. The time frame may be "off" for all of the issues chosen, in which case one would not expect agenda-setting effects. When dealing with multiple issues in a limited time frame, it is only in the seemingly ideal event that the cross-sectional period chosen happens to contain the optimal effect span for each of the issues, that the observed agenda-setting effect will be maximal. Merely extending the media agenda collection to an indefinite period will not solve this problem: The public agenda measuring term still will be restricted. Obviously, more continuous measures of both would solve the problem, thus the advantage of panel studies. Another strategy is to combine an extensive content analysis of the media with the individual examination of issues on the public agenda, using public opinion

FIGURE 2: Aggregate and Individual Issue Salience: Alternative Interpretations of a Hypothetical Distribution





poll data taken at numerous points in time.

Selecting a single short time period and several issues can present problems. Extending the media agenda measuring term to a longer period does not alleviate the problem of individual issue differences with respect to the degree of agenda-setting impact, and rise and fall in duration of exposure in the media. An alternate approach is to compare individual issues in a larger number of opinion polls taken at different points in time, to media content in an extensive time period preceding each of the opinion polls. The latter approach was taken in the present study.

The Optimal Effect Span

Those studies that have to some degree broached the question of time frame suggest that the optimal effect span between aggregate media attention and public priority is between two and five months, and that the impact is a cumulative one, with exposure over time leading to enhanced public salience (McCombs, Becker & Weaver, 1975). As McCombs and Masel-Walters (1976) indicated:

> It appears that the cumulative effects of from three to four months of day-to-day news play result in some issues rising high on the agenda and others disappearing from public view. (p. 7)

In a non-election study of University students, Stone (1975) examined Time and Newsweek for six months before and three months after the dates of his fieldwork. Accumulating the media duration backward from the interviews, he found a monotonic increase in correlations between media and public agendas, especially up to two months prior to interviewing. Cumulative media content

from a full seven months prior to the interviews provided the highest zero-order correlations with students' agendas, on several issues.

Despite this indication, some researchers have found agenda-setting effects using as little as one week's media content immediately prior to the interview period (Mullins, 1977; Becker and McCombs, 1977). Indeed, in a study comparing national television news and Gallup Poll data over an eight-year period, Zucker (1978) found that the media emphasis in the month immediately prior to the interview period was a better predictor of public opinion than was earlier media content. However, Zucker's study was simply designed to focus on types of issues and duration of exposure in the media rather than the optimal effect span.

The present study was designed to overcome this and the other restrictions mentioned above, and to provide insight into the role played by time frame in the agenda-setting process, by examining a single issue over an extended time period.

Method

The public agenda was determined from 27 Gallup polls conducted between 1954 and 1976, which asked the question, "What is the most important issue facing the American people today?" Responses can be classified as the perceived community agenda on the part of the public (McCombs et al., 1979). The public agenda consisted of the percentage of respondents who replied to the question with a response categorized as "civil rights," a percentage that ranged from 0 to 52 over the 22 years.

The media agenda consisted of the number of front page stories on civil

rights in the New York Times, in each of the six months prior to each poll.[1] As the most prestigious national newspaper it was thought that the Times coverage would be indicative of national media coverage on this issue, and that it would be an adequate estimate of media content for comparison with national opinion polls.

There are limiting factors given this imprecise if relatively workable approach. First, there are the limitations on our ability to truly generalize from Times coverage to media content across the nation. However, there are several reasons why the Times was selected as an estimate of national media coverage. It is perhaps the elite U.S. newspaper. Breen (1968:546) found that ten elite newspapers provided the same basic account of two days of Detroit race riots in 1967. Given the predominance of the wire services (Crouse, 1972), it seems reasonable to assume that the same could be said for the non-prestige press. This idea receives further support from what Breed (1955:279) termed the "arterial effect," the observation that news flows downward from the elite dailies. Crouse (1972:73) also indicated, with respect to the 1972 presidential election, that front page coverage in the Times meant prominent coverage in "every other paper in America." Finally, Brown (1971:223) has asserted that the Times is a model from which the television networks derive their news judgments.

Due to the nature of the opinion data, it was not possible to break the sample down into demographic or media-use groups; we are dealing with aggre-

[1] The New York Times Index was used in the study. As there is no civil rights category per se in the index, all "civil rights" stories contained under the "Negro" and "Education" categories were included. Data were aggregated on a monthly basis. There is actually a forced time lag of from 0-2 weeks due to the varied dates of the Gallup interviews.

gate rather than individual figures. It is thought that these limitations will tend to impede the ability to detect an agenda-setting effect, but that at the same time it will be valuable to determine whether such effects can be detected using these aggregate measures and a single issue in a non-election study.

Results

Zero-order correlations (Pearson's r) between the public agenda as measured in the Gallup polls and each of the preceding six months' Times content indicated a slight monotonic descent moving back in time to four months prior to the interviews (from .706 to .654) followed by a dramatic drop in the fifth and sixth months prior to the polls (.530 and .384 respectively). All of the zero-order correlations were significant at the $p < .05$ level.

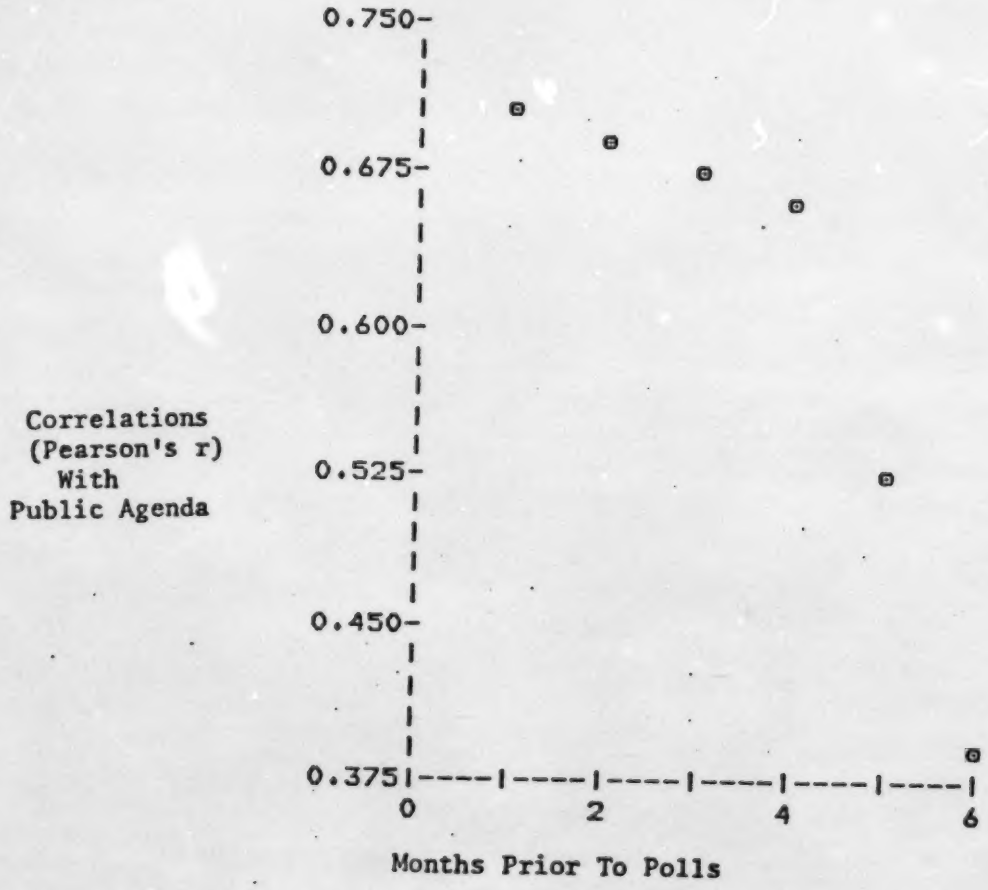
Figure 3 about here

Next, the cumulative impact of the independent variables[1] was examined. The cumulative effect of the first two months prior to the public agenda measures (.84) is about as high or higher than all other combinations of cumula-

[1] By "independent variables" we mean media content in each of the six months prior to polling. Obviously it is possible from the data reported herein that the impact was in the opposite direction, i.e., public opinion influenced media content. Research utilizing panel studies and cross-lagged comparisons has indicated that this is not the case. (c.f. Shaw and McCombs, 1977.)

FIGURE 3

Zero Order Correlations Between
Prior Months and Public Agenda



tive correlations (Figure 3). The correlations for each individual month were then examined while controlling for all of the preceding months in an attempt to establish whether the higher correlations for the two months immediately prior to interviews were the result of "cumulative" or "recency" effects. If partialling out the prior months significantly reduced the zero-order correlations then this would be evidence of cumulative effects. If, on the other hand, partialling out prior months had no effect on the high zero-order correlation in the first month prior to polling, then this would be evidence that recent media content is more influential: hence a "recency" effect.

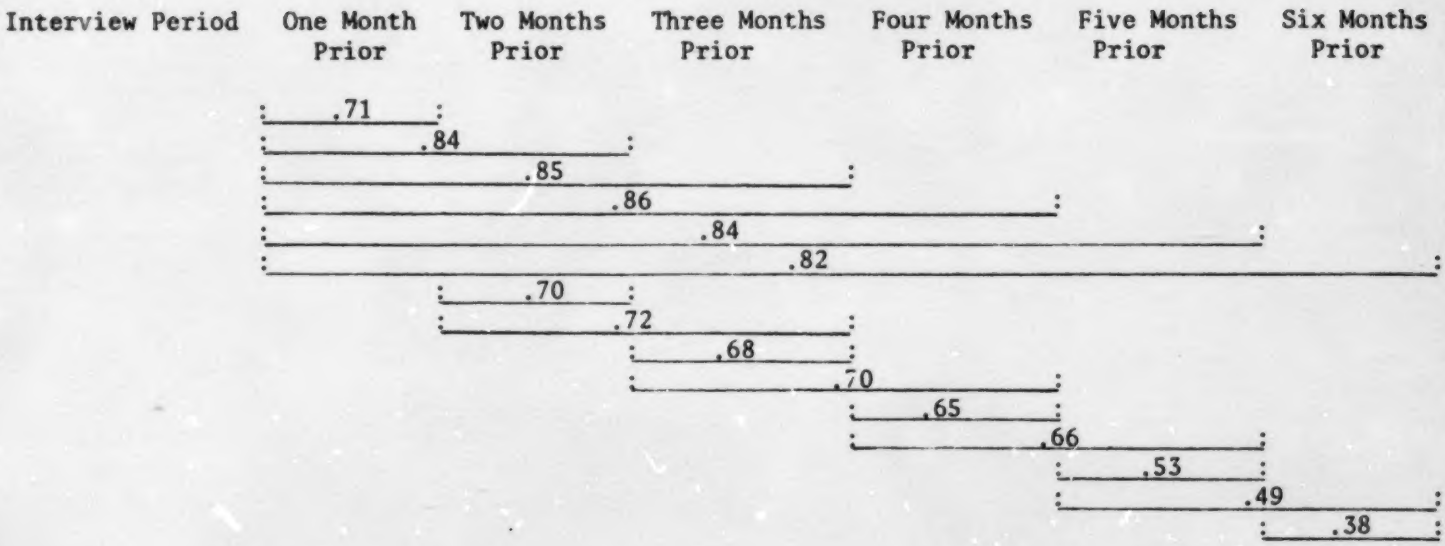
Figure 4 about here

As can be seen in Table 1, partialling out prior months had no effect on the correlation between public agenda and media agenda in the first month prior to interviewing (r=.71). This was not the case, however, for each of the other four months for which partialling was possible, all of which were significantly reduced. The indication is that for the first month prior there is a "recency effect" that is not as highly related to previous months, while for the other months there is a cumulative effect which of course is related to media agenda in previous months.

The next question was whether including all six months in a regression model would significantly improve our prediction of the dependent variable over the inclusion of two months only, or whether in fact one even had to go beyond including one month prior to interviewing. The zero- and partial-order

FIGURE 4

Correlations With Public Agenda By Monthly Periods
Before Interview Period



correlations suggest that one month would be sufficient. For example, the fifth-order partial correlation between first month prior and public agenda (r=.71) does not appear to be dramatically improved by including the second month prior to form a two-month cumulative variable, and then partialling out all other months (r=.77).

Entering the public agenda variable into a multiple regression with all six months yielded an explained variance of .797, compared with r^2=.707 [1] for the first two months only. An F-Test revealed that the difference in explained variance was not significant as the $p < .05$ level.[2] Thus, as expected from the partial correlations, going back beyond two months prior to interviewing for the media agenda did not significantly improve the prediction of the public agenda. Is going back only one month enough? Apparently not. The variance explained by the first month alone is .498, which is significantly improved by the addition of the second month (r^2=.707, F=17.4, $p < .01$).

So, for the civil rights issue it has not been necessary to extend the media agenda beyond two months prior to interviewing in order to predict public salience. Of course, as has been indicated several times in the literature, the time frame will vary with individual issues. Economic issues or political

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[1] High inter-relationships between the independent variables suggest the possibility of multicollinearity. To test this, media content in the first month was entered into a multiple regression with all of the other dependent variables. The overall r^2=.162, F=.811(ns). Repeating this precedure for month two resulted in a significant partial F (F=14.3, $p < .01$) for the third month, but not for any of the others. Of course, media content in one month is highly likely to be related to the content in adjacent months. Perhaps the only mystery in this is why content in the first month prior was not more highly related to other months. The fact that Times content two months prior to polling is highly related to content in previous months may of course explain the fact that it is not necessary to go back any farther than two months.

[2] For the appropriate formula, see Kerlinger and Pedhazur (1973:70).

ones such as Watergate may take months before they become a part of the public agenda, while we are virtually all aware of political terrorism, for example.

The nature of an issue, how it is subsequently reported, and public interpretations of the issue may vary over time as well. By plotting the standardized residual errors[1] against the sequence of Gallup polls over time, we can determine if there are any trends in over- or underestimation. It was thought that due to the development of the Civil Rights movement, and the findings with respect to duration reported by Zucker (1978) which were summarized above, there would be a tendency toward underestimation initially, followed by a period of overestimation. As can be seen in Figure 5, this was indeed the case. Prior to 1965 a lesser amount of coverage resulted in generally higher emphasis by the public, whereas after 1965 greater coverage was not reflected in the public agenda. As suggested, this was expected to be due to a "novelty effect" dependent on the duration of exposure provided to the issue. It may also be due to the public purposely playing down the importance of a distasteful topic. An alternative explanation would be that the public downplayed the racial or civil rights aspect after 1965, when increased violence and rioting could simply be lumped in with general urban decay in the city core. In other words, some of the events after 1965 may have been interpreted as urban rather than racial problems and thus the lessened emphasis on the civil rights issue in the public agenda, despite continued coverage in the media.

This explanation receives some support when we look at the comparative ebb and flow of the issue of "social problems, crime, riots," etc. on the public agenda, again as measured by Gallup. As can be seen in Figure 5, the great-

[1]The difference between the predicted public agenda based on the media agenda, and that which was observed.

Figure 5 about here

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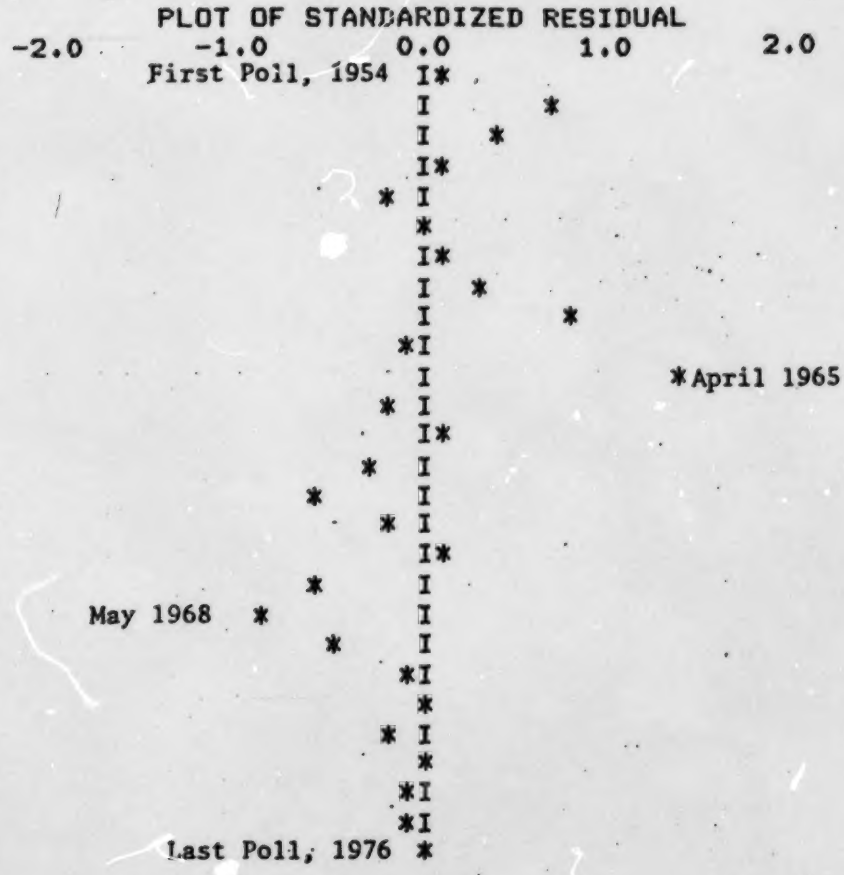
est underestimation of the civil rights issue, the largest negative residual value on the plot, is represented by the May 1968 poll. Despite a lot of civil rights coverage in the preceding months, only 25 percent of the public thought that it was the most important issue when surveyed. At the same time, the social problems, crime and riot issue went from 0 to 15 percent in public opinion (Table 2). In a poll conducted two months later the civil rights issue dropped to 13 percent while the social problems issue rose to number one for 29 percent of the sample. But does the problem lie with interpretations by the public or is it the validity of the Gallup findings that is in question? We cannot tell from the evidence at hand, but the latter would seem at least as likely as the former, given that "riots" are included under social problems rather than civil rights.

Discussion

What is clear from the above is that due to the nature of the data, as expected, the estimation of the agenda-setting effect has been diminished. If the Gallup interviewers had probed into the mere mention of "riots" as the most important issue, they probably would have found that they were "race riots," which would be more correctly categorized under civil rights. In short, the problem may not lie so much with public conceptions of the issues as it does with the Gallup methodology, which, were it corrected, would be expected

FIGURE 5



Durbin-Watson Test = 1.45 (inconclusive)

to reduce the negative residual errors in the latter half of the study. An additional problem of course would exist if the New York Times Index categorizations vary over time. However, this study has provided further evidence of a strong agenda-setting effect despite the use of an aggregate public agenda and the New York Times front page. More importantly it indicates that at least for the civil rights issue, the optimal effect span is the four- to six-week period immediately prior to fieldwork. While content analyzing the media one month prior to this results in a significant improvement in prediction, there is little reason for gathering data from any farther back in time than that. These findings contradict those reported by Stone (1975) for example, by suggesting that issues receiving recent media emphasis are more salient to the public than cumulative effects over time.

The examination of other issues is a step that remains to be taken, but due to the variable nature of issues it would appear that more insight into the agenda-setting process may be gained by treating them individually rather than in the aggregate, with respect to time frame.

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TABLE 1

Zero and Partial Order r's Between Media and Public Agendas
Controlling for Prior Months

	1st Month Prior	2nd Month Prior	3rd Month Prior	4th Month Prior	5th Month Prior
Zero Order	.71	.70	.68	.65	.53
Partials	.71	.43	.28	.48	.40

TABLE 2

Most Important Issue*

	05/68	07/68
Civil Rights	25%	13%
Social Problems, Crime, Riots	15%	29%

* Source: Gallup Poll

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